

#MeToo and the History of “Hashtag Feminism” in the MENA Region

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Before the online viral #MeToo campaign stormed the globe in October 2017, since 2011 there had been several influential social media campaigns championing women's rights in the MENA region. With an estimated population of 258,356,867, 65% of MENA inhabitants had access to the Internet as of December 2018.¹ While women have less access to the Internet than men,² recent history shows this does not preclude women from advocating for their rights in a substantive manner, both online and offline. For example, Saudi Arabia's 2011 #Women2Drive movement initiated an international social media campaign to pressure the Saudi monarchy into lifting the ban on female drivers.³ Also in 2011, after Egyptian activist Aalia Elmahdy published a nude self-portrait on her blog⁴ as a political statement about agency, morality and autonomy,⁵ wom-

en in Egypt participated in the #NudePhotoRevolutionary campaign. In solidarity with Elmahdy, Iranian women's rights activist, Maryam Namazie, launched the Nude Photo Revolutionaries Calendar project, published on 8 March 2012.⁶ Other Iranian women rights activists used YouTube videos to show support for the calendar's publication as well as to express their own protest against a repressive regime in Iran.⁷

In Morocco, the 2013 #RIPamina campaign mobilized public pressure on the government resulting in the 2014 repeal of Penal Code Article 475, which allowed a rapist to escape prosecution if he married his victim.⁸ During 2014, women in Iran participated in the “My Stealthy Freedom” movement, in which they removed the chador in public places, photographed themselves, and then posted the photos on social media. The “My Stealthy Freedom” Facebook page, as of early 2019, had just over one million followers.⁹ The movement evolved into the #white-wednesdays campaign where Iranian women donned white headscarves and white articles of clothing, and then discarded them in public places. Photos and vid-

¹ INTERNET WORLD STATS, “Internet Usage in the Middle East,” accessed 20 April 2019. www.internetworldstats.com/stats5.htm.

² GSMA ASSOCIATION. *The Mobile Gender Gap Report 2018*, February 2018. www.gsma.com/mobilefordevelopment/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/GSMA_The_Mobile_Gender_Gap_Report_2018_32pp_WEBv7.pdf. Based on the findings of this report, in the MENA region there is a nine percent gap between men and women's ownership of mobile phones. From this research it can be inferred that women have less access to the Internet than men.

³ HUBBARD, Ben. “Saudi Arabia Agrees to Let Women Drive,” *The New York Times*, 26 September, 2017. www.nytimes.com/2017/09/26/world/middleeast/saudi-arabia-women-drive.html.

⁴ LOWER, Molly. “The Anatomy of Oppression,” *The WVoice*, 28 August 2018. <https://medium.com/the-wvoice/the-anatomy-of-oppression-dacb45e784d1>.

⁵ HAAS, Rachel. “One Year on from the #MeToo Movement, what exactly has changed?,” *World Economic Forum*, 26 November 2018. www.weforum.org/agenda/2018/11/metoo-women-equality-one-year-later/.

⁶ NAMAZIE, Maryam. “Nude Photo Revolutionary Calendar is Here!,” 8 March 2012. <https://maryamnamazie.com/nude-photo-revolutionary-calendar-is-here/>.

⁷ MORADI, Reza. “Nude Photo Revolutionary Calendar,” 7 March 2012. Content contains nudity, only viewable with an adult user YouTube account. www.youtube.com/watch?v=OafFpdjEAaE.

⁸ HUMAN RIGHTS WATCH. “Girl's Death Highlights Flawed Laws,” 23 March 2012. www.hrw.org/news/2012/03/23/morocco-girls-death-highlights-flawed-laws.

⁹ “My Stealthy Freedom,” *Facebook*. Accessed 25 April 2019. www.facebook.com/StealthyFreedom/.

eos posted to social media outlets raised the campaign's international profile.¹⁰

In the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, 63 women's rights organizations launched social media campaigns in 2016 lobbying house members to abolish Penal Code Article 308.¹¹ In the summer of 2017, the Jordanian Parliament repealed the penal code provisions allowing rapists to escape punishment by marrying their victims.¹² During the same year in Lebanon, #Abolish522, #Undress522,¹³ and viral videos featuring the message, "a white dress does not cover the rape,"¹⁴ catalyzed a critical mass that influenced the government to repeal Penal Code Article 522 (removing a guilty charge for marrying a rape victim).

#MeToo exposes how policy reforms extending political, civil and economic rights to women have not influenced negative socio-cultural behaviours toward women

In fact, at the political level, 2017 turned out to be a watershed year for the women's rights agenda in parts of the region, with several hashtag campaigns attached to the efforts. On 26 September 2017, Saudi Arabia announced a royal declaration to end the ban on women drivers to go into effect in June 2018.¹⁵ In December 2017, amidst the #MeToo momentum, Egypt's Parliament passed a law granting

women equal inheritance rights to men.¹⁶ Amending a 1943 personal status law that permitted women only half the property inheritance of men, in this new version of the policy any individual who attempts to deny a woman her fair share of assets or property faces imprisonment and a fine. The Egyptian government views this policy as a potential game changer in the economic plight of Egyptian women.¹⁷

Why #MeToo Resonates with Women of the MENA Region

#MeToo has evolved into a unique, intersectional feminist social media campaign, calling for the public sharing of sexual assault and harassment testimonies to illustrate the commonplace experience of sexual violence against women. It is "ultimately a plea for justice, not an enactment of it,"¹⁸ and demands a shift in cultural norms that perpetuate gender inequality, practiced by all genders. It is a global effort to expose the day-to-day behaviour toward, and the ongoing mistreatment of women, and to place the burden of responsibility on the wrongdoers. Furthermore, #MeToo exposes how policy reforms extending political, civil and economic rights to women have not influenced negative socio-cultural behaviours toward women. A look at the MENA region provides an opportunity to examine this global realization.

In mid-October 2017, a poll published by the Thomson Reuter Foundation determined Cairo to be the most dangerous megacity for women, with conditions having worsened since the 2011 uprising.¹⁹

¹⁰ HATAM, Nassim. "Why Iranian women are wearing white on Wednesdays," *BBC*, 14 June 2017. www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-40218711.

¹¹ SADEK, George. "Jordan: Repeal of Controversial Article in Penal Code," *Library of Congress*, 8 August 2017. www.loc.gov/law/foreign-news/article/jordan-repeal-of-controversial-article-in-penal-code/.

¹² BEGUM, Rothna. "Middle East on a roll to repeal 'marry the rapist' laws," *Al Jazeera*, 24 August 2017. www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2017/08/middle-east-roll-repeal-marry-rapist-laws-170822095605552.html.

¹³ BBC NEWS. "Lebanon rape law: Parliament abolishes marriage loophole," 16 August 2017. www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-40947448.

¹⁴ ANANI, Ghida. "Abolishing Lebanon's 'Rape Law': Spotlight on ABAAD's Campaign," *Girls Not Brides*, 22 September 2017. www.girlsnotbrides.org/abolishing-lebanons-rape-law-spotlight-on-abaads-campaign/.

¹⁵ HUBBARD, Ben. "Saudi Arabia Agrees to Let Women Drive," *The New York Times*, 26 September 2017. www.nytimes.com/2017/09/26/world/middleeast/saudi-arabia-women-drive.html.

¹⁶ VOGELSTEIN, Rachel B. "Women Around the World: This Week," *Council on Foreign Relations*, 15 December 2017. www.cfr.org/blog/women-around-world-week-107?sp_mid=55581567&sp_rid=aGVpZGIAd29tZW5zdm9pY2Vzbn93Lm9yZwS2.

¹⁷ HUSSEIN, Walaa. "Inheritance plan could be game-changer for Egyptian Women," *Al-Monitor*. www.al-monitor.com/pulse/fr/originals/2016/07/egypt-inheritance-rights-women-disputes-courts.html.

¹⁸ RACHIDI, Soukaina. "#MeToo Movement Clashes with Arab Patriarchy," *Inside Arabia Online*, 19 September 2018. <https://insidearabia.com/metoo-movement-clashes-arab-patriarchy/>.

¹⁹ THOMSON REUTERS TRUST. "Thomson Reuters Foundation Annual Poll: The world's most dangerous megacities for women 2017," Accessed 23 March 2019. <http://poll2017.trust.org/>.

Upon publication of the poll, the National Council for Women (NCW), the Egyptian government body set up to address the concerns and rights of women, protested the poll's findings. The NCW cited President Al-Sisi's declaration of 2017 as "the year of the Egyptian woman," to support their refuting of the report.²⁰ In an interview with BBC Arabic posted on YouTube, Sanaa El Sherif, a NCW representative, referred to a female governor and women deputies and generals in the army as proof of Egyptian women's political and economic empowerment.²¹ From El Sherif's vantage point, and others of her stature, women have made progress. But the El Sherifs of the region misunderstand, or refuse to acknowledge, what #MeToo has brought to the foreground of public discourse.

One of the most vivid examples illustrating the toxic system that #MeToo challenges also comes from Egypt. In October 2015, at a mall in Heliopolis, an eastern suburb of Cairo, a man sexually harassed Somaya Tarek Ebeid, who became known in Egyptian media as "the mall girl."²² Ebeid chased down her assaulter, Hany A., who then physically attacked her until security guards removed him. Captured on security cameras, Hany A. was arrested and imprisoned for two weeks, after which he was acquitted of sexual harassment charges.²³ Shortly after posting the incident on Facebook, Ebeid was invited to tell her story on the Egyptian television show, "Sabaya El-Kheir," hosted by Riham Said, a female television personality. Believing her appearance on the show would elevate the discussion on rampant sexual harassment in Egypt, Ebeid was blamed for the attack instead. Said illegally aired intimate pictures to "prove" Ebeid was at fault.²⁴ In October 2017, Ebeid's attacker

waited for her outside a pharmacy, slashed her in the face with a sharp instrument, and then ran off.²⁵

A self-censoring culture based upon a shame and honour system inhibits members of MENA societies from challenging harmful social practices

Generally speaking, a self-censoring culture based upon a shame and honour system inhibits members of MENA societies from challenging harmful social practices. In Upper Egypt, for example, where the issue of inheritance injustice is particularly acute, social custom keeps women from demanding their inheritance rights, an important reminder that tradition isn't transformed by legislative changes made in the capital.²⁶ To expose one's "personal misfortunes or inadequacies in public, or even in private,"²⁷ violates the honour code. #MeToo provides a safe space for women and men in the region to begin overcoming this cultural taboo.

Furthermore, despite policy reform that extends rights to women, in some cases the day-to-day quality of life for many does not improve, or even worsens. In June 2018, the ban on female drivers was lifted in Saudi Arabia. At the same time, the system of male guardianship remains in place.²⁸ Additionally, since mid-2018 there has been an acceleration of a crackdown on civil society, specifically the women's movement, with the arrest of dozens of women and feminist human rights activists²⁹ and others fleeing the country

²⁰ AMIN, Shahira. "Egyptian women speak out amid global focus on sexual assault," *Al-Monitor*, 23 October 2017. www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2017/10/egypt-sexual-harassment-campaign-report-metoo.html.

²¹ HASSAN, Abdulbasir. "Reuters survey designates Cairo the most dangerous city for women," *BBC Arabic*, 17 October 2017. www.youtube.com/watch?v=4Goqq0oQ91M&feature=youtu.be.

²² AMIN, Shahira. "Egyptian women speak out amid global focus on sexual assault," *Al-Monitor*.

²³ AL-MASRY AL-YOUM. "'Mall girl' sexual harasser who revenged victim referred to trial," 10 November 2017. www.egyptindependent.com/mall-girl-sexual-harasser-who-revenged-victim-referred-to-trial/.

²⁴ EGYPTIAN STREETS. "Riham Saeed's Television Show Suspended After Airing Private Photos of Abuse Victim," 30 October 2015. <https://egyptianstreets.com/2015/10/30/riham-saeeds-episode-cancelled-after-revealing-private-photos-of-abuse-victim/>.

²⁵ AL-MASRY AL-YOUM. "'Mall girl' sexual harasser who revenged victim referred to trial," <https://www.egyptindependent.com/mall-girl-sexual-harasser-who-revenged-victim-referred-to-trial/>.

²⁶ HUSSEIN, Walaa. "Inheritance plan could be game-changer for Egyptian Women," *Al-Monitor*. www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2016/07/egypt-inheritance-rights-women-disputes-courts.html.

²⁷ RACHIDI, Soukaina. "#MeToo Movement Clashes with Arab Patriarchy," *Inside Arabia Online*,

²⁸ VOGELSTEIN, Rachel. "Women Can Drive Now in Saudi Arabia. Here's What They Still Can't Do," *Fortune*, 28 September 2017. <http://fortune.com/2017/09/28/saudi-arabia-women-driving-economic-effect/>.

²⁹ INTERNATIONAL VIEWPOINT. "The Me Too Movement in the Middle East," 10 February 2019. www.internationalviewpoint.org/spip.php?article5939.

and seeking asylum.³⁰ In fact, most of the 11 women on trial as of April 2019 were incarcerated weeks before the ban was lifted in 2018,³¹ sending a clear message that women's rights are meted out at the pleasure of the King and are not to be used to challenge his authority. Moving to Tunisia, in November 2015, Amnesty International reported that the Tunisian Association of Democratic Women determined that almost 70 percent of Tunisian women have been physically or sexually abused in one form or another.³² While there have been major victories in legislation granting and expanding protections for female victims of violence, activists admit that only women living in large cities, like Tunis and Sousse, are aware of their new rights; and, as it took 30 years to achieve these goals, it may take another 30 years to really change the situation for women in the country.³³

MENA Hashtag Feminist Campaigns after #MeToo

Prior to 2017, feminist hashtag campaigns primarily focused on particular legislative reform agendas either directly (#Women2Drive, #Abolish522), or indirectly, through the narrative of a victim (#RIPAmirna). After #MeToo, MENA social media campaigns do not offer solutions, such as policy changes, but rather expose a cultural grievance, similar to the 2011 #NudePhotoRevolutionary campaign, or an injustice, exposing the poor treatment of women. In doing so, these campaigns challenge the moral values of a collective identity in which women cannot talk about sexual violence and its intersection with women's rights and gender equality without fear of a backlash from not only men, but also other women.³⁴ The campaigns,

true to the spirit of #MeToo, upend victim blaming, putting the onus where it should be – on the perpetrator – whether it be the State, state agents, or every day men and women shaming those who suffer socially-condoned gender violence.

Taking an example from Turkey, in January 2018, a campaign called #BenDeNevin (#MeTooNevin)³⁵ went online and led to a public demonstration in Istanbul to protest the upholding of a life imprisonment sentence for NevinYıldırım. In 2012, Yıldırım brutally murdered a man who repeatedly raped and then blackmailed her with nude photos. She became pregnant from one of the rapes and sought to restore her honour by killing him. Her case sparked debate across Turkey on violence against women as well as abortion in the case of rape.³⁶

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In 2018, the world came to know Yasmeen Mjalli, founder of #NotYourHabibti (Not Your Baby/Darling), confronting sexual harassment in Palestine.³⁷ Mjalli and her followers use #NotYourHabibti to promote her clothing brand, BabyFist Denim, which produces denim jackets and t-shirts with anti-harassment slogans. BabyFist Denim expanded into an international community organization that seeks to foster “open and honest conversation and to challenge the oppressive gendered structures of society,” wherever they exist.³⁸

³⁰ AMOS, Deborah. “Saudi Kingdom Tries to Prevent More Women from Fleeing,” *NPR*, 13 March 2019. www.npr.org/2019/03/13/701570312/saudi-kingdom-tries-to-prevent-more-women-from-fleeing.

³¹ REUTERS. “Saudi women back in court as West watches,” 3 April 2019. <https://news.trust.org/item/20190403132101-5lime>.

³² AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL. “Tunisia: Rapists Given a Way Out While Their Victims Are Blamed and Punished”, 25 November 2015. www.amnesty.org/en/press-releases/2015/11/tunisia-rapists-given-a-way-out-while-their-victims-are-blamed-and-punished/.

³³ BAILEY, Charlotte. “One Year Ago, Tunisia Passed a Groundbreaking Law to Protect Women. Has It Worked?,” *Time*, 26 July 2018. <http://time.com/5348377/tunisia-women-violence-law/>.

³⁴ GHAZAL, Rym Tina. “Arab Women Wake Up to #MeToo Movement,” *Khaleej Times*, 8 March 2018. www.khaleejtimes.com/editorials-columns/arab-women-wake-up-to-metoo-movement.

³⁵ BURASI SENINMEDYAN. “KadınlarNevinYıldırım için Kadıköy’de Eylemde,” 2 January 2018. https://seninmedyan.org/2018/01/02/kadinlar-nevin-yildirim-icin-kadikoyde-eylemde/?fbclid=IwAR1h-L23YUgN_e2KYZylAuAEn7AbVEKpuZo7fuXJa4Lr7WM6UGF8wxV-4A.

³⁶ DAILY SABAH. “NevinYıldırım’s life imprisonment sentence upheld in district retrial,” 22 March 2018. www.dailysabah.com/investigations/2018/03/22/nevin-yildirims-life-imprisonment-sentence-upheld-in-district-retrial.

³⁷ OLEWITZ, Chloe. “Babyfist Denim Is the Arab Brand Championing Gender Equality in Palestine,” *Vice*, 13 March 2018. www.vice.com/en_asia/article/vbp9dx/babyfist-denim-is-the-arab-brand-championing-gender-equality-in-palestine.

³⁸ BABYFIST. “What We Do,” 2017. <https://baby-fist.com/trace-impact-gender-equality-in-palestine>.

Organizers of the #GirlsofRevolution campaign used it and #whitewednesdays to ask for international support of their cause as women throughout Iran took to the streets to “gain their freedom” in March 2018.³⁹ #GirlsofRevolution started after Vida Movahed removed her headscarf at an anti-government demonstration on 27 December 2017, on Enghelab (Revolution) Street in Tehran. Also in March 2018, Movahed was given a 24-month prison sentence. In response, social media followers around the world started the #WhereIsShe campaign to raise public concern about Movahed’s case and whereabouts.⁴⁰

Will #MeToo Move Us Forward?

For nearly a decade, women of the MENA region have employed hashtag campaigns to catalyze long-awaited policy reforms advancing women’s rights. In some cases, recent history shows that legislative victories in favour of women’s rights, bolstered by online efforts, are attainable. However, #MeToo found supporters in the region because these achievements have proven to be superficial and limited in both scope and reach.

The global #MeToo movement calls for change that is much more profound than women gaining access to economic opportunities or political participation. It seeks to diminish the influence of patriarchy on so-

ciety, a system in which power is the right and privilege solely of males, and in which both women and men behave in ways that maintain the status quo. It is too soon to know if #MeToo, its call for a culture shift toward substantive gender equality, and its global support will push the women’s rights agenda forward at a rate faster than the efforts of the previous three waves of feminism. Only time will tell. In a region where the number of women’s rights groups has tripled since 1980, there will certainly be no lack of effort.⁴¹

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³⁹ HERNROTH-ROTHSTEIN, Annika. “The Girls of Revolution Street, Waving Their Veils,” *National Review*, 8 March 2018. www.nationalreview.com/2018/03/the-girls-of-revolution-street-waving-their-veils/.

⁴⁰ SULAIVANY, Karzan. “Iran sentences woman who removed hijab during protests to 24 months: Prosecutor,” *Kurdistan 24*, 8 March 2018. www.kurdistan24.net/en/news/1eb7dc1c-6d4f-4f8d-adeb-2d055147411d.

⁴¹ SHIN, Benjamin G. and CHERIF, Feryal. M. “The big gains for women’s rights in the Middle East, explained,” *The Washington Post*, July 23, 2018. www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2018/07/23/womens-rights-are-advancing-in-the-middle-east-this-explains-why/?utm_term=.f343323de938.